

“No Child Left Behind” School Choice Provisions: Devilish Details for South Carolina’s Neediest Schools

Research & Trends Analysis: South Carolina Today & Tomorrow

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INTRODUCTION

School Choice—a proposition wherein students may exert a “market influence” on public schools and opt for relocation to better schools—certainly possesses solid logic. It offers an incentive for public schools to prove competitive else they lose students and, along with them, precious funds. Likewise, a sense of social fairness supports the notion that students should not be forced to remain at failing schools.

School Choice models have been effectively implemented in the United States. However, virtually all cases of successful School Choice implementation show a distinct common element—these programs are effective in urban areas where public and private options are abundant. Relocation is typically to a nearby alternative, and public transportation systems often assume a significant supporting role. This pattern begs a question of paramount importance: Do reasonably proximal alternative schools and plausible transportation systems exist to allow South Carolina students in our most troubled schools to truly exercise School Choice?

Empirical evidence and previous research indicate that these are critical questions. This report was prepared to highlight some of the key issues surrounding the plausibility of effective implementation of school choice options for “unsatisfactory” schools in South Carolina. Also, the objectives for our continued research on this subject are offered.

FINDINGS

Devilish Details:

Unfortunately, and as is well documented, South Carolina’s neediest schools are typically located in our poorest, most rural areas, and are most heavily populated by minority students. In fact, among South Carolina schools classified as “unsatisfactory” by the state Department of Education, 35% have **no other** school within their district to which they may transfer. For these schools, public school choice is a fallacy in their district (Table 1, Figure 1, Appendix 1).



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Unsatisfactory Schools in South Carolina:

Number of Public School Alternatives in District

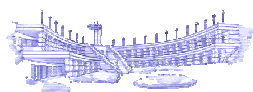
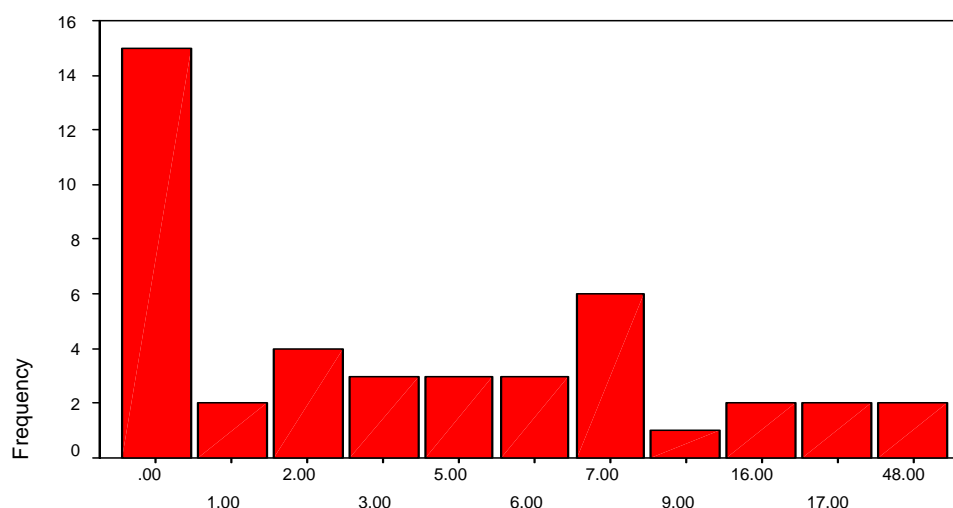
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	.00	15	34.9	34.9	34.9
	1.00	2	4.7	4.7	39.5
	2.00	4	9.3	9.3	48.8
	3.00	3	7.0	7.0	55.8
	5.00	3	7.0	7.0	62.8
	6.00	3	7.0	7.0	69.8
	7.00	6	14.0	14.0	83.7
	9.00	1	2.3	2.3	86.0
	16.00	2	4.7	4.7	90.7
	17.00	2	4.7	4.7	95.3
	48.00	2	4.7	4.7	100.0
	Total	43	100.0	100.0	

Table 1. Unsatisfactory Schools in South Carolina: Number of Public School Alternatives in District.

Figure 1. Unsatisfactory Schools in South Carolina: Number of Public School Alternatives in District.

Unsatisfactory Schools in South Carolina:

Number of Public School Alternatives in District



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This lack of public school alternatives is a serious threat to the exercise of “school choice” in South Carolina. Thirty-one of our 46 school districts can be considered “choice challenged” in that they have one or no public school alternatives at either the primary, elementary, middle, or high school levels (Appendix 2). Should a school in one of these districts fail, where might a student “choose” to go?

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation contains provisions whereby a student may transfer out of one district to another, an apparent recognition of school choice limitations for rural areas. However, a review of the legislation shows that such provisions are highly vague and the implementation of inter-district transfers faces a number of obstacles, particularly in rural states such as South Carolina.

If students in our most rural and, therefore, least densely populated school districts choose to transfer to another satisfactory or better public school, what are the *full* costs? As noted previously, it is these types of school districts for which public school alternatives are least abundant, often with no public school alternatives available within the home district. One likely effect would be drastically increased costs—in terms of financial resources and student time—spent in transport. In their research, Miley and Associates (2003) found a direct relationship between density and student achievement. They determined that “excellent” districts had nearly twelve times the density of the poorest performing districts, and that “good” districts have about half the densities of the excellent districts¹. Already a disproportionate percentage of rural district budgets go towards transportation as compared to their urban counterparts, and time spent in transport rather than in instruction or productive learning intuitively exerts a negative effect on student achievement. Imagine the effect on poorer district budgets when forced to pay to collect and then transport these students outside the district. Even more telling, imagine the effect on these young people spending an even greater proportion of their time in a bus seat rather than a desk. NCLB vaguely provides this path—but is the cost of traveling this path too great?

Of course, the above argument assumes that students will opt to relocate outside their district and/or that other strategies such as “supplemental services” will not improve conditions within a home district. First, who is likely to opt to relocate? Consider the following observation.

“Quality of schools in a district directly and strongly determines whether white students will choose to attend public schools. It is very clear that if the schools are judged to be excellent or good the parents of white students will send their children to the schools. They are also highly likely to support the efforts of the school administration to financially support the schools. Conversely, white parents living in districts with schools that are judged to be below average or unsatisfactory send their children to public schools in significantly lower

¹ Miley and Associates (2003). “School District Organization in South Carolina: Evaluating Performance & Fiscal Efficiency.” Available at <http://www.state.sc.us/eoc/PDF/MileyReportFinalDraft010903A.doc.doc>



proportions. In fact, at the high school level only about 55% of the white students are attending the schools in districts with unsatisfactory ratings.”²

The convergence of factors in our struggling districts suggests immense implications. Our neediest school districts, currently and traditionally struggling with weak tax bases, difficulty in recruiting higher-quality teachers, and, due to their rural characters, disproportionate costs associated with transportation, are not very likely to find vast support within their communities. Caucasian families increasingly are opting for private schools, and it empirically appears that the rate of decline in enrollment in struggling, poor, high-minority districts is likely more associated with “white-flight” than general demographic trends.³ In some areas, “school choice” may in fact take the form of subsidized re-segregation.

And still, the details of inter-district tuition transfer are not clearly spelled out by NCLB. This obstacle is left to the states to manage and, in highly rural states such as South Carolina, it will be extremely tempting to “press” supplemental services over the exercise of school choice to avoid the transportation issue. Further, districts in greatest need of both “choice” and supplemental service provision typically have fewer public school alternatives as well as fewer supplemental service providers. As market theory would suggest, supplemental service providers will, and do, locate most often in areas of higher potential consumer density. Rural, highly dispersed student populations are not as attractive markets. As the number of public school alternatives decreases, there is a statistically significant corresponding decrease in supplemental service providers—most pronounced in our rural areas (Figure 2).

Correlations			
		Total Public School Alternatives in District	Total Supplemental Service Providers in District
Total Public School Alternatives in District	Pearson Correlation	1	.644**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
	N	43	43
Total Supplemental Service Providers in District	Pearson Correlation	.644**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
	N	43	43

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Figure 2. Correlation Between “Total Public School Alternatives in District” and “Total Supplemental Service Providers in District”

² Miley and Associates (2003). “School District Organization in South Carolina: Evaluating Performance & Fiscal Efficiency.” Page 31. Available at <http://www.state.sc.us/eoc/PDF/MileyReportFinalDraft010903A.doc.doc>

³ Miley and Associates (2003). “School District Organization in South Carolina: Evaluating Performance & Fiscal Efficiency.” Available at <http://www.state.sc.us/eoc/PDF/MileyReportFinalDraft010903A.doc.doc>



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PROSPECTUS FOR CONTINUED RESEARCH

The proposed continuation of this project represents an aggressive exploration of potential negative impacts, inefficiencies, and ineffective policy structures imbedded in school choice provisions of "No Child Left Behind" (NCLB). This research will identify all failing and near-failing schools, as classified by the South Carolina Department of Education, and will estimate costs associated with exercise of school choice options within NCLB. Cost estimates will include transportation, transportation time, and differences in per-pupil expenditures between school of origin and alternative school. The current research design involves more than 40 variables to be collected for each school in the state.

Ultimately, the questions to be addressed center on the plausibility and potential for effectiveness of NCLB School Choice provisions for the neediest of schools in South Carolina, which are typically located in our most rural, poorest communities.

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Personnel: Dr. Greg Hawkins

Project Cost: Internal

Distribution: "The State" newspaper, represented by reporter Ellyde Roko, has expressed strong interest in this analysis, and has requested an interview upon completion of this initial phase and the second phase of work. Reports and supplemental "citizens guides to school choice" will be placed on JSCF Website.

Project Briefing



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Appendix 1

“Unsatisfactory” Schools in South Carolina

DISTRICT	SCHOOL	# PUBLIC SCHOOL ALTERNATIVES IN DISTRICT ¹				
		Below Avg	Average	Good	Excellent	Total
Allendale	Allendale Elementary	0	1	0	0	1
Allendale	Allendale-Fairfax Middle	0	0	0	0	0
Allendale	Allendale-Fairfax HS	0	0	0	0	0
Bamberg 2	Denmark-Olar HS	0	0	0	0	0
Berkeley	Cross HS	2	3	4	0	9
Charleston	Clyde Sanders Elem.	10	20	6	12	48
Charleston	Brentwood Middle	5	5	3	4	17
Charleston	Rivers Middle	5	5	3	4	17
Charleston	Baptist Hill HS	0	1	3	3	7
Charleston	Burke HS	0	1	3	3	7
Charleston	Lincoln HS	0	1	3	3	7
Charleston	North Charleston HS	0	1	3	3	7
Charleston	RB Stall HS	0	1	3	3	7
Charleston	St. Johns HS	0	1	3	3	7
Chester	Chester Senior HS	1	1	0	0	2
Chesterfield	Central HS	0	0	2	1	3
Dorchester 4	Woodland HS	0	0	0	0	0
Fairfield	Fairfield Middle	0	0	0	0	0
Florence 4	Johnson Middle	0	0	0	0	0
Greenville	Hollis Academy (Elem)	4	11	21	12	48
Greenville	Parker Academy (Middle)	3	7	5	1	16
Greenville	Tanglewood Middle	3	7	5	1	16
Hampton 2	Estill Middle	0	0	0	0	0
Hampton 2	Estill HS	0	0	0	0	0
Jasper	Ridgeland Middle	1	0	0	0	1
Jasper	Jasper County HS	0	0	0	0	0

¹ Number of Public school alternatives, presented based upon 2003 Report Card Ratings for Schools (<http://www.sde.state.sc.us/reportcard/2003/>)

“Unsatisfactory” Schools in South Carolina

DISTRICT	SCHOOL	# PUBLIC SCHOOL ALTERNATIVES IN DISTRICT ²				
		Below Avg	Average	Good	Excellent	Total
Lee	Lower Lee Elementary	1	2	0	0	3
Lee	Mount Pleasant Middle	0	0	0	0	0
Lee	Lee Central HS	0	0	0	0	0
Marion 7	Creek Bridge HS	0	0	0	0	0
Marlboro	Bennetsville Middle	4	1	0	0	5
Orangeburg 3	Elloree HS (Middle)	1	0	0	0	0
Orangeburg 3	Elloree HS	0	0	0	0	0
Orangeburg 3	Holly-Hill Roberts HS	0	0	0	0	0
Orangeburg 4	Hunter-Kinard-Tyler HS	1	0	0	1	2
Orangeburg 5	Bowman HS	0	0	2	0	2
Richland 1	Alcorn Middle	4	2	0	0	6
Richland 1	Gibbes Middle	4	2	0	0	6
Richland 1	WA Perry Middle	4	2	0	0	6
Richland 1	CA Johnson HS	0	3	1	1	5
Richland 1	Eau Claire HS	0	3	1	1	5
Spartanburg 7	MW Whitlock Jr HS	1	0	1	0	2
Williamsburg	Youth Academy Charter (HS)	1	2	0	0	3

² Number of Public school alternatives, presented based upon 2003 Report Card Ratings for Schools (<http://www.sde.state.sc.us/reportcard/2003/>)

Appendix 2

“Choice Challenged³” School Districts in South Carolina

DISTRICT	Primary	<u>NUMBER OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS</u>		
		Elementary	Middle	High School
Allendale	0	2	1	1
Anderson 3	0	2	1	1
Bamberg 1	0	3	1	1
Bamberg 2	0	1	1	1
Barnwell 19	0	1	1	1
Barnwell 29 (Williston 29)	0	1	1	1
Barnwell 45	0	1	1	1
Clarendon 1	0	2	1	1
Clarendon 3	0	1	1	1
Colleton	0	7	3	1
Dillon 1	0	1	1	1
Dillon 2	0	4	1	1
Dillon 3	0	1	1	1
Dorchester 4	0	2	1	1
Fairfield	0	5	1	1
Florence 2	0	1	1	1
Florence 3	0	5	2	1
Florence 4	0	1	1	1
Florence 5	0	1	1	1
Greenwood 51	0	2	1	1
Greenwood 52	1	1	1	1
Hampton 2	0	1	1	1
Laurens 56	0	4	2	1

³ “Choice Challenged” defined here as exhibiting one or more school category showing only one option.

“Choice Challenged⁴” School Districts in South Carolina

DISTRICT	Primary	<u>NUMBER OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS</u>		
		Elementary	Middle	High School
Lee	0	4	1	1
Lexington 3	1	1	1	1
McCormick	0	2	1	1
Marion 1	1	1	1	1
Marion 2	1	2	1	1
Marion 7	0	2	1	1
Spartanburg 4	1	1	1	1
Spartanburg 5	0	6	1	1

⁴ “Choice Challenged” defined here as exhibiting one or more school category showing only one option.